



Reading with Your School-Age Child: Building Vocabulary One Word at a Time

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Parents are invested in insuring the best outcome possible for their child who has an autism spectrum disorder (ASD). This article puts a different spin on parent opportunity to help one's child build his/her vocabulary. It is focused on awareness of a particular way of viewing vocabulary and contains suggestions for some targeted teaching during reading aloud activities. It involves building on information commonly known within the educational community.

Background

The National Reading Panel (NRP) report in 2000 made many recommendations for educators about important components of reading. Good vocabulary development was one area identified as important for reading comprehension. In later elementary school and beyond, mature readers learn new word meanings as they encounter the words in print. Typically, younger children DO NOT learn the meaning of early reading words as they learn to read them. Instead, these new reader's draw upon their already established repertoire of receptive spoken vocabulary words for the meaning. So, for example, when a first grade child learns to read the word "dog," he usually already has a mental concept of what constitutes the category of "dog-ness." Teachers assume that young students have an underlying competency with specific basic words but they recognize the need to teach the meaning of others. Which "others" to teach, is an important question. Since the NRP report, school systems have incorporated various approaches to address vocabulary enhancement. One of the concepts in the vocabulary field is the classification of vocabulary into three tiers; this concept has particular importance for individuals with ASD. The three tiers are defined in the following manner:

- **Tier 1.** These basic common words usually have a physical concrete referent and are the easiest to teach with regard to meaning. These are often the words teachers assume that children already know. Educators, however, may teach examples of multiple meaning for these words, idioms, and high frequency everyday expressions. Examples of Tier 1 words include "school," "block," "boy," "walk" or common expressions such as "make up your mind."
- **Tier 2.** These high frequency words contribute to the richness of books and conversation and are sometimes described as utility words. There is usually a lack of explicit instruction for many of these words, unless there is a demonstrated need for such. These words are less concrete but students have often acquired the meaning of many through exposure during daily living activities. Examples of Tier 2 words include "simple," "because," "for instance," "estimate," "plot" and "country." Mastery of Tier 2 words is important for the comprehension of text books and daily reading material. There are too many words in this class for teachers to teach all the vocabulary words that might constitute Tier 2, so they must be selective. Tier 2 is sometimes called the level of the mature language user; this does not mean only adults users but individuals who have moved beyond basic simple sentences and basic concrete vocabulary.
- **Tier 3.** These are low frequency words that are found in content books about specific subjects. These are words that children may not encounter until the upper grades. These words need to be consciously learned and/or taught directly since they are not common in ordinary communication or media exchanges. Examples of Tier 3 words include: "isotope," "phylum," "Impressionism," and "Renaissance Period."

Teachers will vary in whether they choose to teach a lot of vocabulary, usually Tier 2, with traditional drill/dictionary work or to teach a smaller number of words while insuring depth and breadth of word meaning. A parent may wish to be familiar with his/her child's teachers approach and reinforce the vocabulary being learned.

Implications for Parents of Children with ASD

Understanding Tier 2 becomes important for parents of even preschool children. If one looks at children's books in the bookstores or at the library, many contain words that do not represent simple concepts. For example, on the site www.storylineonline.net if one views/listens to a pre-school/early elementary school book entitled Sebastian's Roller Skates, one will encounter many Tier 2 words just in this singular book. The lists includes, "shy, blush, geography, tropical islands, billiard ball, regret, capital of Iceland, heart broken, concentrate, imagine, glide, repair, balance, Sahara Desert, and Mount Everest." This list illustrates three points: the abundance of Tier 2 words, their frequency, and the futility of trying to directly teach every word. Some words will need to be taught on an-as-needed basis if they have not been learned incidentally. There are no lists of everything that might be classified as Tier 2; much depends on the circumstances.

A parent will want to be aware of the concept of Tier 2 words because of the frequency of their usage, their importance for reading comprehension, but also because of what parents know about their child's disability of ASD. There has to be concern that children with ASD as a group will have more difficulty with Tier 2 words because they have language learning problems and may:

- Not have an interest in the conversation and dialogue that occurs around them—the source for incidental learning of some vocabulary for other children
- Only attend to key words in the utterances of others and miss the gist of the message
- Not ask about the meaning of words
- Deduct a wrong interpretation of meaning
- Have a shallow or restricted interpretation of meaning
- Have strength in Tier 1 words because the referents are more concrete
- Have delayed development in acquisition of Tier 1; may or may not have caught up to peers
- Require more direct teaching of Tier 1 vocabulary than typical peers
- Decode print words or repeat words but may have little understanding of the meaning

A parent can be in a better position to help his/her child in the vocabulary area if he/she has more awareness of exemplars of the tiers. One source of high frequency words that is age sensitive are the suggested vocabulary lists for augmentative communication users. Four lists are available: PreSchool Nondisabled Children Vocabulary, Vocabulary List for Augmented Infant/toddlers-Elementary, Vocabulary Lists: Young Adults (typical conversation and written communication vs. augmented conversation), and 20-30 Year Old Nondisabled Adult Vocabulary. These can be accessed at <http://aac.unl.edu>. Of course, the older the individuals in the sample, the more the lists will include Tier 2 and Tier 3 words. For the younger children, the lists will contain a significant portion of Tier 1 words. Tiers are not identified in the lists so one will need to use the descriptions presented earlier to informally classify words into tiers.

There is no specific list of Tier 3 words either but one can gather ideas from various sources. Tier 3 is for special interests and not just academics. For the parents of an upper elementary aged to secondary level aged child, an interesting site to explore is http://www.vocabulary.com/dir-wordlist-word_list-alphabetic. This directory leads to extensive vocabulary lists on many topics ranging from baseball to bees to geology. This might be a source for Tier 2 as well as Tier 3 within special topics. For baseball, for example, the list includes "league," "loyalty," and "superstition" which might represent Tier 2 while "ERA," "ground out," and "triple play" may be Tier 3 vocabulary that is only of interest to someone who enjoys watching/playing baseball. It is easy to under or over-estimate your

child's familiarity with common vocabulary which is why these lists may be helpful.

As mentioned earlier, there is no specific site to Tier 2 words. A selective list, however, called a high-incidence academic word list with 570 words is available from: http://notebook.lausd.net/pls/ptl/docs/page/ca_lausd/fldr_organizations/fldr_instructional_svcs/instructionalsupportservices/language_acq_home/lang_acq_pro_dev/handout4_academic_word_list.pdf or Google "A High-Incidence Academic Word List" + "Kinsella" to retrieve the list. Kinsella states that this list represents "...a very important vocabulary for learners intending to pursue academic studies in English at the secondary and post-secondary levels." Parents should not feel that they personally have to teach all of these words. Rather, the purpose of this article is to raise awareness and to offer sources of information so tiers might be recognized and teaching done selectively as the opportunity arises. It must be remembered that it is important to distinguish between recognizing a word versus knowing the meaning. Reading skills usually lag behind the ability to recognize heard words during the early elementary years. Heard word knowledge, however, is the foundation for reading. Everyone may receptively know more word meanings than words they could define or would use in their daily vocabulary.

Building Vocabulary While Reading Aloud

Although one may use words of various tiers in oral conversation, a book reading activity by Mom or Dad might still represent the best structured and motivating context for teaching a few Tier 2 words per month (assuming the child has a reasonable command of Tier 1 words). If possible, a parent will want to read through a book or chapter ahead of time, identify potential Tier 2 words, and then select one to three targets. If it is a book that will be read repeatedly, then it is easy to build more recognition or to shift to other choices after the first few seem acquired by the child. Of course, generalization to other situations is crucial or the meaning may become restricted to the situation in the book. Each parent will need to find what works best for his/her child and his/her own comfort level with "teaching" a few vocabulary words that are not as concrete as Tier 1. The child's teacher may have useful suggestions that may help the process. The school speech language pathologist may have administered a test that can give school staff and family a picture of how the child stands relative to other children of the same age from a tiered vocabulary perspective. (The assessment is called the MAVA or Montgomery Assessment of Vocabulary Acquisition; it is targeted for ages 3 through 12).

Teachers will use a technique to evaluate prior knowledge about words that might occur in an upcoming chapter, unit of study, or a book to be read (Beck, McKeown, and Kucan, 2002). Parents might also want to use this particular approach with their child to evaluate their knowledge of certain oral (or print) words. This approach will be more successful at home if the child is already familiar with it from school. It can be modified from recognition of a printed word to a question about an orally presented word (the print version applies if the child is reading; the oral word version, if the parent is reading).

Recognition of Print	Recognition of Oral Word
Never saw it before	Never heard it before
Saw it but don't know what it means	Heard it but don't know what it means
Recognize it as having to do with _____ (context)	Think it has to do with _____ (topic)
Know it well—can explain and use	Know meaning well—can explain and use

A parent could keep the oral word version chart handy as a cue when reading aloud to his/her child. A parent would not want to check every Tier 2 word in a story because that would make story-time an unpleasant and lengthy experience but a few words might be checked out prior to reading or just automatically explained during the

reading event. Parents do not want to become formal teachers and must use informal methods that fit a home lifestyle if they wish to add some vocabulary to their child's repertoire. They may need to explain meaning or repeat the sentence by saying it in another way. It may be helpful to use the select target words in many situations and with some frequency over several days. Parents may wish to keep a log of what they are informally targeting and solicit the help of others in the generalization process. They will want to be sure to go back to review on a periodic basis (i.e., make an effort to use the vocabulary word again and again over time and/or re-read the book which was the original source of the instruction).

Research suggests that it is hard for readers to intuit meaning just from a context. Sentence and paragraphs contexts vary in terms of how many clues and information they provide that would lead a reader to a correct interpretation of an unfamiliar vocabulary word. If one only encounters a word rarely, it is less likely to become a useful component of one's repertoire. That brings learning back to some direct instruction across the age levels. For young children, teachers are advised to select words that represent concepts understandable to the audience (i.e., the young child). Second, it is advisable to select words that can easily be explained to someone of a given age and language ability level. Third, it is important to select words that are useful and which the child is likely to encounter again with some frequency. With reference to the book Sebastian's Roller Skates mentioned earlier, words like "concentration" and "balance" might fit these criteria for targeting with this book and in other daily living activities.

The primary guideline for teaching new vocabulary words is known by every educator and most parents (i.e., you help the child attach the new information to the old or familiar). So, with the example from Sebastian's Roller Skates, one might help the child understand "balance" by tying it to concrete examples. One could ask the child to stand on one foot and try to not tip over (i.e., lose his balance). He could attempt to balance a book on his head. He could be reminded of the days when he was learning to ride his bike (i.e., if he lost his balance, he fell off the bike). Depending on the child's age, one could introduce a broader meaning into the conceptual realm. For example, people balance a checkbook or their checking account on line. They balance sleep and work, work and fun, etc. Your child is much more likely to remember these associated examples than a dictionary definition. One could even give him/her some reward for using the target word(s) in his/her conversation during the week, if this is an age appropriate challenge.

Reading aloud to your child gives him/her an opportunity to hear/learn vocabulary that he/she may not be able to read on his/her own. The read aloud situation allows for an interactional exchange that will not occur when he/she reads alone at his/her reading level. Building vocabulary is an important goal with life-long implications. Parents can help their child do this (i.e., build vocabulary one word at a time).

Resource

Beck, I., McKeown, M. G., & Kucan, L. (2002). *Bringing words to life: Robust vocabulary instruction*. New York, NY: Guilford Press.

Vicker, B. (2009). Reading with your school-age child: Building vocabulary one word at a time. *The Reporter* 14(3), 11-14.